Television Week

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Second Thoughts

When the United States Embassy was seized in Iran in late 1979, six Americans escaped from the compound, were hidden by the Canadian ambassador and his staff and then smuggled out of the country. The story will be recounted in "Escape From Iran: The Canadian Caper," on CBS on Sunday evening at 8.

Why now? Les Harris, the Canadian producer of the film, says that if a producer at CBS had listened to him when he first broached the idea, he might have been able to televise the drama when it was more timely — when the 52 hostages who didn't escape were finally released. As Mr. Harris tells it, CBS wanted at first to "Hollywoodize" the event. And that delayed matters.

"I told them the truth is more exciting, more nail-biting than any fiction you could come up with," reports Mr. Harris, who says his research included an unexpected look at secret cables from the American Charge d'Affaires when Mr. Harris was left alone at the Iran Crisis Center in Washington the night that U.S. helicopters made an unsuccessful rescue attempt.

After Mr. Harris made a documentary on the subject in Canada, he says, CBS took up his proposal for a "docudrama."

A spokesman for CBS maintains that "no one ever wanted to fictionalize" the story. The network did, however, always intend to "dramatize" it, he said, adding that perhaps the difference of opinion was "semantic."

Mr. Harris acknowledges that *some* dramatic license was taken in "Escape from Iran"; for instance, two people in the embassy are combined into one. But, according to Mr. Harris, the story is otherwise factual. At any rate, he says, the delay in getting the film onto the home screen shouldn't lessen the story's impact because "it's so exciting" and because "the American audience hasn't a clue as to what really happened."

Problem Play

Elijah Moshinsky, the young British theater and opera director, had never worked in television before; so, he found it "quite terrifying" to stage Shakespeare's "All's Well That Ends Well," which will be shown on Channel 13 on Monday evening at 8.

The real problem, though, according to Mr. Moshinksy, was the play itself. "It's very ambiguous," he says. "No one knows whether it's a comedy or not."

The plot focuses on Helena (Angela Down), a young woman who is determined to marry Bertram (Ian Charleson), an arrogant and shallow nobleman. When she wins his hand as a reward for curing the king, the young groom flees but is eventually corralled.

Among other things, the play reflects a conflict between generations, Mr. Moshinsky says. The older generation, including the Countess of Rousillon, (Celia Johnson), "seem to be pleasant, committed morally, with a golden view of life. The younger generation are slightly nasty, ambitious and devious people." And it is they who will inherit the earth — a "pretty bleak conclusion" for a comedy, the director observes.

Then how did he approach "All's Well"? "We play it as straight psychological drama," Mr. Moshinsky says.

Christie's Clues

When a dramatization of Agatha Christie's "The Seven Dials Mystery" was presented a month ago, John J. O'Connor, The Times television critic, called it "a dud" and complained that key characterizations were changed "suddenly in midstream."

On Thursday at 8 P.M. on Channel 5, a second Christie mystery, "Why Didn't They Ask Evans?" will be shown. Will this dramatization fare better? Some people say dramatizing *any* of the author's works is difficult because she provides few clues about her characters' personalities. Francesca Annis — who was seen in the title role of "Lillie" on public television and who stars in "Why Didn't They Ask Evans?" — says she had a hard time figuring out the sort of person she was to play in this forthcoming production.

However, Jack Williams, the British producer of both mystery films, insists that a careful reading of Christie reveals plenty of clues about her characters. The hero of "Why Didn't They Ask Evans?" (played by James Warwick) is, among other things, "a silly ass type of man" but also a "very nice bloke," Mr. Williams reported from London.

The bloke discovers a dying man at the foot of a cliff who gasps a question — the title of the mystery. The characters that Mr. Warrick and Miss Annis portray then "do a bit of amateur sleuthing" that gets them into several knotty spots before unraveling who dunnit.

Rite of Passage

As Richie in ABC's long-running series "Happy Days," Ron Howard had been an innocent teen-ager for seven years.

This Monday at 9 P.M. on NBC, Mr. Howard will portray a "much more serious" — and grownup — character in "Bitter Harvest." He plays a young dairy farmer who tries frantically to identify a chemical that he believes is killing his cattle and harming his infant daughter. Art Carney plays a neighboring farmer in the drama, which is based on a true story.

The 27-year old actor, who is married and actually has an infant daughter, thinks he could still get away with playing a 19-year-old, though not for much longer. Anyway, his main interest, he says, is directing.